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# Remembering a Visit to the World's Oldest Carnegie Library

Matthew R. Griffis

*University of Southern Mississippi*, [matthew.griffis@usm.edu](mailto:matthew.griffis@usm.edu)

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## Remembering a Visit to the World's Oldest Carnegie Library

(Portions of the following appeared in slightly different form as "Searching for Carnegie," in *Mississippi Libraries* 78(1), 4-9 and are reproduced here with permission.)

Matthew Griffis, Assistant Professor  
School of Library and Information Science  
The University of Southern Mississippi  
[matthew.griffis@usm.edu](mailto:matthew.griffis@usm.edu)

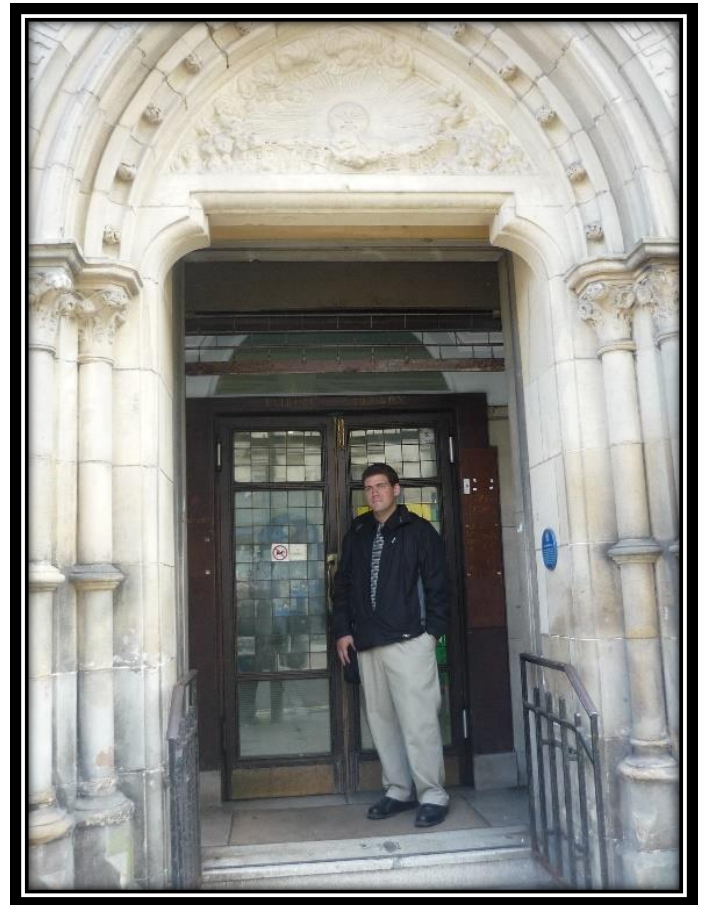
There was perhaps no greater stimulus to modern public library development than Carnegie's library grant program, which funded the construction of over 2,800 libraries worldwide at the turn of the last century. In their day, Carnegie libraries were more than just charming buildings; they fueled a growing enthusiasm among the masses for the existence of free, tax-supported public libraries intended to enrich their parent communities—especially those for which no comparable institution had existed before.



**Figure 1. Statue of Andrew Carnegie, Dunfermline**  
Born in 1835, he would later be known throughout the world as the "Patron Saint of Libraries."

### Introduction

While preparing for my first experience as co-instructor for SLIS's British Studies Program in 2014, I was told that students often consider the program one of the most unforgettable experiences of their university years. I never imagined it would also become one of the most unforgettable of my own academic career, but it did. That summer our class visited one of Dunfermline, Scotland's most famous landmarks, the Carnegie Library of 1883. Originally a gift from steel mogul and philanthropist Andrew Carnegie—Dunfermline's most famous native—the 130-year-old building was the first library Carnegie ever opened. And as such, the structure, which still operates as part of the town's public library system, is the oldest surviving Carnegie library in the world (Figures 2 – 9).



**Figure 2. Dr. Griffis at Library's Front Door**  
First Carnegie Library, Dunfermline



**Figure 3. Students Explore the Library's Exterior**  
 In the foreground, original structure completed 1883;  
 in the distance, extension constructed ca. 1914-21.



**Figure 6. Another Enchanting Book Room.** Work in  
 1993 left much original millwork untouched.



**Figure 4. "Let There Be Light"**  
 The library's elaborate front entrance.



**Figure 8. Many of the First Modern Public Library  
 Buildings were Designed like Small Cathedrals.**  
 Their message: knowledge is sacred.

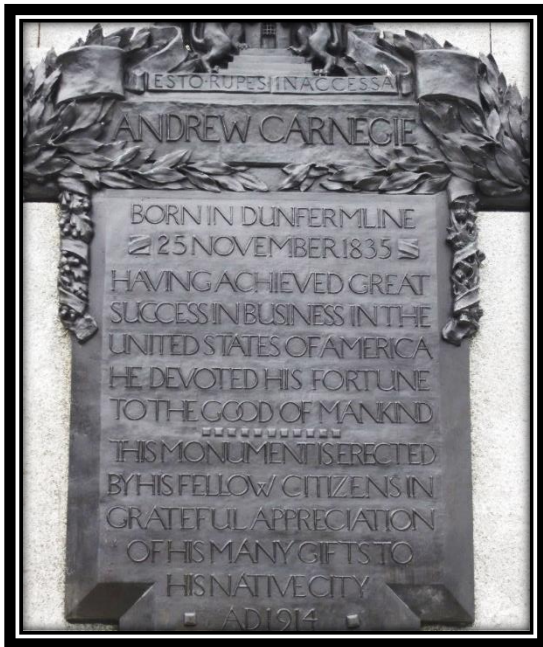


**Figure 5. One of the Library's Reading Rooms,**  
 cleared of books for the 2014 renovation.



**Figure 8. Dr. Griffis Examines Library Blueprints,**  
 originally drawn by architect J.C. Walker.





**Figure 9. Tribute erected ca. 1914, during the first of three major renovation and expansion projects.**

Andrew Carnegie had always loved libraries: Born in 1835, Carnegie was the son of a handloom weaver. The family knew no life above hand-to-mouth poverty. Leaving Scotland in hopes of a better life, the Carnegies settled in Pittsburgh, where young Andrew was put to work in factories to help the family survive.

Lacking a formalized education, Carnegie sought his own through the connections he made in his community. He borrowed books from his superiors, some of whom opened their private libraries to young workers in hopes of shaping young talent for their growing companies. Making his way up the ranks of several businesses, the young man had by his early twenties made his way through several prominent positions in the telegraph and railroad industries and began investing his early wealth in manufacturing. By middle age, he had founded the Carnegie Steel Company in Pennsylvania and was poised to become one of the richest men of the modern age.

A longtime advocate of philanthropy, Carnegie sold his steel empire to J. P. Morgan in 1901 and dedicated his efforts full-time to redistributing his wealth to causes he believed “advanced” society. He gave liberally to technical schools, concert halls, and other cultural and educational institutions.

However, Carnegie believed that free public libraries were the “best” of all possible gifts for as long as they existed anyone would have access to self-education. After funding the construction of several free libraries in Scotland in the 1880s, Carnegie funded several more in his Pennsylvanian steel towns in the 1890s. By the 1920s, his library program had produced over 2,800 public and academic libraries throughout the English-speaking world: 1,689 in the United States, 126 in Canada, and hundreds more across the UK, Australia, New Zealand, and parts of the West Indies.

Though much has been published about Carnegie libraries in North America, relatively little work is available about Carnegie libraries elsewhere. These buildings are seldom seen outside their home countries.



**Figure 10. Around the Corner, Down the Street Stands Carnegie’s birthplace, a little stone cottage now part of Andrew Carnegie Birthplace Museum**

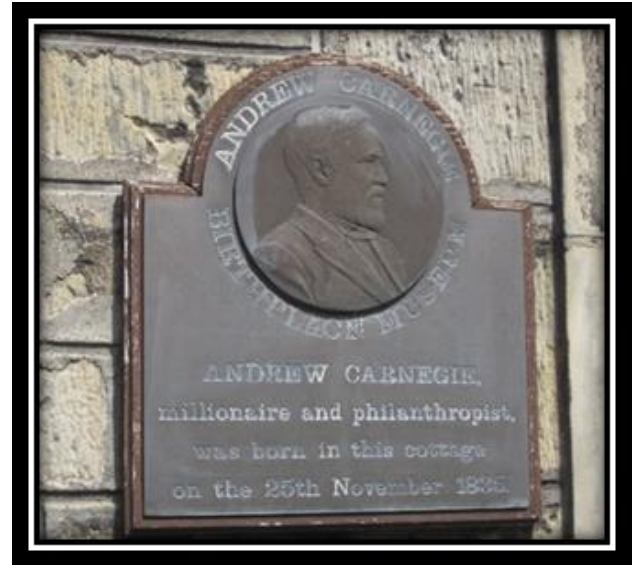
Our tour, which was made possible by special arrangement with the Carnegie Library of Dunfermline, not only emphasized the value of studying library history as part of librarian education, it also served as an introduction, for some participants, to the story of Carnegie libraries. Our visit was unforgettable, and though the Dunfermline library had been temporarily closed at the time for renovations, these photos nevertheless reveal its beauty and mystery.

The photos also document our visit to Carnegie's birth house just around the corner, to which is now attached a museum that preserves and celebrates his life, work, and philanthropic legacy (Figures 10 – 12).

(Photographs by Dr. M. Griffis and Dr. T. Welsh)



**Figure 11. Dr. Griffis and Students Outside the Carnegie Museum's Front Entrance**



**Figure 12. Plaque outside the Museum:  
“Andrew Carnegie, millionaire and philanthropist, was born in this cottage on the 25th of November 1835.”**